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ABSTRACT

Findings are presented from an experimental study of consultants, a three-year project funded by the Human Services Development Branch of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the purpose of which was to provide a technology for use by consultants within youth-serving organizations in the diffusion and utilization of innovative programs. Guidelines derived from comparative follow-up studies of agencies that did not participate in the field experiment include the need to: (1) seek access to a group through the introduction of a trusted colleague and encourage the leader's cooperation by showing how a visit will benefit the leader's work; (2) select strategies for a group consultation through information supplied by a profile summary of how group members perceive group readiness to effect needed change; (3) identify in advance a group's most troubling needs; (4) assume that the more structured and goal-oriented groups will require a longer time to introduce and establish an innovative change; and (5) prepare strategies for identifying and handling obstacles that arise when certain innovations or changes are proposed. Additionally, reasons for the non-participation of groups in consultation efforts are listed and discussed. (Author)

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A Planned Change Approach to Consultation and Youth Service

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My presentation draws on findings from an experimental study of consultants, a three-year project funded by the Human Services Development Branch of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Its purpose is to provide a technology that can be used in the diffusion and utilization of innovative programs.

The focus of the project is on the use of consultants within youth-serving organizations. Most of these national organizations hire consultant advocates to visit local agencies for the purpose of effecting the utilization of needed programs and making organizational improvements. The guidelines I present relate especially to such persons--consultants who serve voluntary, service organizations in the interests of effecting the utilization of innovative knowledge on a short term basis.

My first guideline relates to gaining entre to a local unit for consultation. (In voluntary organizations one of the prior tasks of a consultant-advocate is to get invited.)

1. Guideline for Gaining Access and Cooperation

Seek access to a group through the introduction of a trusted colleague and encourage the leader's cooperation by showing how a visit will benefit the leader's work.

We made a study of 21 agencies that refused every standardized invitation to enter our field experiment--luncheon invitations, personalized letters, telephone calls, and offers of a personal visit. As a result of their uncooperative-

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ness, we came to refer to these 21 as resistor groups. We assumed they would score high in measures of resistance, and low in measures of openness and ability to effect program change.

A year and a half later, we returned to this hard core group of resistors and gained access to all 21 by a simple device of being introduced to the non-cooperating leaders by a mutual friend or colleague. In 18 of the 21, we also gained their cooperation by showing the leader a profile printout of information that could become available to them. We found these administrators keenly interested in objective data that profiled in graphic form how their organization is perceived with respect to innovativeness of atmosphere, group skills in effecting change, preferred criteria when judging innovations, and latent types of resistance. As a result of seeing this profile printout, 18 of the 21 agreed to supply us survey data on their people in exchange for a profile printout on their own group. Of the 18, 16 actually followed through.

Now we had data on the hard-to-reach resistor groups. Unexpectedly, our 18 measures of readiness for program change showed that these 16 agencies did not, on the average, measure high on resistance or low on innovative attitudes. On the contrary, they averaged the same on the 18 scales as the 38 agencies that participated in the field experiment. We learned that a group ought not be characterized as resistant or non-innovative merely because the leader denies access.

2. Guideline for Strategizing Visits

If possible, inform your selection of strategies for a group consultation through information supplied by a profile summary of how members of the group to be visited perceive their group's readiness to effect needed change.

We developed an instrument based on the Davis A VICTORY Behavioral Model

that yields 18 highly reliable and valid measures of a group's readiness to effect needed changes. These 18 measures assess the degree to which staff, program leaders and policy makers perceive their organization with respect to these four areas: 1) innovativeness of atmosphere, 2) skill in effecting changes, 3) resistance to change, and 4) criteria used when evaluating innovations.

Using this instrument we have found that groups vary markedly in their ability to deal with issues of change, in their feeling of need to consider a change, in their sense of mission, and in their emotional reactions to new proposals. These differences often become most apparent in a profile of data supplied by group members. Prior information of this kind can forewarn a consultant to take remedial steps that otherwise might not be considered.

In our study, two skilled consultants visited 12 agencies without such prior profile information. Then they visited 26 agencies having received in advance a full printout of information based on the readiness for program change instrument. The profile data provided the basis they used for determining what strategies to use in upcoming visits or consultations. According to our trained observers who were present at each visit, and the consultants themselves, the prior knowledge gained from a profile summary enhanced the effectiveness of their visits.

The instrument developed for this project has been broadened for use in any service organization, shortened to 93 items, and made available for hand scoring. Specimen sets will be available by November 1, should you be interested.

3. Guideline for Identifying Need

Identify in advance a group's most troubling needs, with the intent of structuring consultations to show how a change or innovation will meet these needs.

The power of this seeming truism became apparent in an analysis for determining what factors accounted for the variance in the utilization scores of 38

agencies. This analysis showed that a single item accounted for 27 percent of the variance -- an item which assessed the degree to which a consultant's visit was seen as a worthwhile experience. We made a content analysis of the recordings of ten consultant visits--five where the groups were unanimous in their perceptions of the visit's worthwhileness, and five where the groups were divided in their opinions. The analysis showed two quite distinct patterns of response. Those who were unanimous in their perception of the visit's worthwhileness identified early in the visit their local needs and related them to the innovative program. Their discussions characteristically revolved around their discussion of the need and how the program could help meet this need. Clearly, their feelings of the visit's worthwhileness were based on seeing how all that was presented related to a clearly-perceived and generally-felt sense of need. In the five groups rating their consultant's visit lowest in worthwhileness, this unifying motif of a sense of need was missing.

These data simply reaffirm the fact that a consultant's likelihood of success is enhanced by the degree to which he or she is able to identify, clarify, and intensify a group's sense of need and relate proposed changes to how this need can be met.

4. Guideline re: Flexibility in Timing

When strategizing a visit, assume that the more structured and goal-oriented groups will require a longer time to introduce and establish an innovative change.

As you well know, a field experiment must operate under time constraints--a time when the experiment begins, a time when program opportunities are given, a time when the experimental period ends and data analyses can begin. What we did not anticipate in our experimental design were the differential effects of

these time constraints. We discovered to our surprise that agencies measuring highest in openness and skill in effecting program change, tended not to take advantage of an innovative program they saw as highly attractive. Contrastingly, agencies scoring lowest on such measures responded most to the training offered during our field experiment.

A follow-up study of the 15 agencies not responding to the training opportunities provided an explanation for the unexpected results. Agencies most skilled in systematic listening, in long-range planning, and in providing on-the-job-training for its leaders were the least disposed to interrupt their current plans and add something new. In other words, the more innovative the group, the less able they were to consider something new for the current year. Their goals were usually set for the year, with assignments given and personnel time fully committed. The groups most free to enter into the time constraints of a field experiment, accept the experimental training and launch a new program all in the current year were the less structured and goal-oriented groups. Unfortunately, these were usually the least skilled in bringing about a change and hence the least likely to establish what they had adopted.

Moral: When planning consultation, give high credence to the issue of time constraints. The more structured and goal-oriented the group, the longer it will probably take for a change to be introduced and made operative.

5. Guideline for Meeting Resistance

Prepare strategies for identifying and handling the obstacles that arise when certain innovations or changes are proposed.

Our project showed the limitation of consultative help that does no more than supply information and direction. Groups also need help in facing the practical problems that surface once the enthusiasm over new possibilities gives way

to thoughts about such practical matters as problems as finances, of overcoming a preference for the traditional, and problems related to lack of staff or time.

We found that the practical issues which dampened the group's enthusiasm for adopting a needed innovation did not surface until later. We interviewed 38 respondents, three from each group that failed to take advantage of an innovation they had viewed as highly desirable. The reasons they gave for their group's failure to act classified easily into the Davis A VICTORY factors. When classified and ranked in order of frequency given, the reasons for non-participation can be summarized as follows:

1. Ability--time, cost, staff, talent (matters that could have been resolved if known)
2. Obligation (sense of need)
3. Timing
4. Information (clarity of)
5. Yield (assumed gain)
6. Values
7. Resistance
8. Circumstance

These reasons, which became apparent following the consultant's presentation, were never dealt with. Though an offer had been given for a return visit to deal with specific issues, none of the groups took the initiative to request such a visit.

The obvious need is for a checklist that can help a group identify the obstacles that begin to take shape once an innovation is taken seriously, as well as the intensity with which they serve as deterrents. Also needed is a proactive role by the consultant in helping a group problem-solve the obstacles seen as most serious.

These, then, are five guidelines that have become apparent from our research. They can provide some guidance to consultants when preparing for visits to voluntary service agencies.